

Sometimes Swinging Doesn't Point to Anything Else

“Did you know you can boil a frog without him jumping out if you raise the temperature slowly enough?” Brian tried to lighten the mood; it was the only way he knew how to cope.

Linda dug her stiletto heel into Brian's recently polished dress shoes, “We're not talking about a God damn frog here. We're talking about dad.”

The electric company disconnected the unit and the house slowly cooled down. The long days of summer were counterproductive and it felt like weeks before Linda and Brian could go in to collect Earl's things. Brian slid his switchblade through the space between the door and its frame, slicing the yellow seal of police procedure. They walked in and let everything sink below: they felt guilt. They had left their father alone to the devices that brought them here now; the devices that were ultimately his own. But they still felt like they had some culpability.

Linda went one way, off in a daze, and Brian went another. As Brian took one ginger step after another, re-acclimating himself to a place he hadn't been in almost a year, he found the facts hung up in his head, as if on a bulletin board:

Overheated. Cooked from the outside in. The paramedics needed to wait for the fire department. Took one step in and realized it was too hot without heat resistant suits. Eggs were found literally fried in their shells – the refrigerator crapped out months before. Wax candles were in pools, their wicks still factory grade unlit, just swimming in apple cider scents or new car smell. The wallpaper had started to fray at its ends and wisp upwards in curly geysers. The coroner couldn't determine time of death because his liver temp was that of someone living and breathing with a 104-degree fever. Police found his hair lying in mats around his house; the follicles had begun to lose their grip after about the last 4 times he incrementally raised the temperature.

Brian had all the pieces; they just didn't make any sense. It was like he was trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle without seeing the picture it was supposed to make.

When he set his keys down, Brian remembered the one thing Nick, Earl's mentor, said of Earl

at his retirement party, “This man is a MacGyver who could rig a cell with a rubber band and toothpick that MacGyver himself couldn't even break out of.” So he knew his father was capable of doing what he did. What he did was rework his entire central heating unit, the ducts, pipes, everything so it would pump out more of just that: heat. Brian just couldn't understand why he would do that.

Brian walked over to the desk where a picture of his mother, Florence, and Earl were standing with their arms around each other outside of a lake house they sold years ago. The picture was fogged up in its frame. He lifted it and noticed the residue of sweaty fingerprints clouding the glass in front of Florence's face. She died almost a year ago, or rather she left them. During the night, she climbed on the kitchen counter, took down the flower pot that Earl insisted had to be hanging off an industrial-strength hook, tied the rope she stole from Earl's supplies, and left him to awake to more oxygen in the air. In her eulogy, Earl said he could feel the difference. The minute he became conscious of that inhale followed by its counterpart, he felt fatter. Like the sum of the years in Florence's life finally got equated and changed the chemical balance of the air. There was no note. No warning signs. Just her on a stainless steel slab leaving the image of rope-burn and several hundred questions in her husband's and children's minds.

Brian dragged an inattentive hand across the books stacked on the wall shelves. Earl was a genre fiction reader. Murder/Mystery. John Sanford. Sue Grafton. Hated watching Columbo for some reason. Said it was because he couldn't feel the clues between his fingers watching TV. He could never figure the angle when he watched Columbo's playing-dumb act but the gospel he developed in the first 15 pages of a Dan Brown book became testified, almost without fail, in the closing chapters.

Brian smiled as he turned away from the years that came flooding back after seeing those books and saw the chair. Earl was found in his recliner, eyes closed, reverent. Brian walked over to it and felt a shudder like a thumbtack through his shoe. The urge to sit down, to occupy the space his father did last, was too great. When the hard cushion gave way the little it could under his weight, Brian noticed a difference. He was the one who felt fatter even though he hadn't known what it felt like to be in the

same room as Earl for a long time.

He stood up, looked back down at the chair, and saw something catch the light wedged in the cushion. When he fished it out, slowly revealing it inch-by-inch – silver, a chain, a cross – he realized that it was his mother's crucifix necklace. She wore it out of obligation, keeping it in a fruit bowl until mass or when she was going somewhere she knew other Catholics patronized. Brian sat back down in his father's chair rubbing a thumb across Jesus' abdomen. At her funeral, Brian saw that something had shifted in Earl, like a paper jam. Maybe it had happened in him before. Maybe it had happened in him often only now Florence wasn't there to clear it. For all his expertise, he needed a homemaker to fix him. Brian looked around. The remote controller for the TV looked as if it was welded to the table. Suicides went to Hell. He knew that she was going to a place hot enough to do all this.